Interview with David L. Osborn

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR DAVID L. OSBORN

Interviewed by: Bert Potts

Initial interview date: January 16, 1989

Q: Good morning, Mr. Ambassador.

OSBORN: Good morning, Bert. Anxious to get started?

Q: Yes, I think we have quite a lot to cover today, and I'm really looking forward to this experience with you, and to share those wonderful experiences you've had. As we begin this interview, would you start, please, by telling me what personal background activities led you to your interest in foreign affairs?

OSBORN: I got into the Foreign Service on the basis of a deep interest in languages. As an undergraduate at Southwestern University, in Memphis, I majored in Greek. Then I got a scholarship to go on to Harvard and study Japanese and Chinese. I was doing that when the war began. I enlisted in the Navy; the Navy sent me to its Japanese language school at Boulder, Colorado, and I spent the war as a Japanese language officer.

Then when the war ended, I had no particular career in mind, except to go back to Harvard and use up the remainder of my scholarship, along with the G.I. Bill; so I asked one of my instructors, a young professor named Edwin Reischauer, for his advice. He suggested I

take the Foreign Service exams. So I took them, and accidentally passed, and that's how I got into the Foreign Service.

But at the first, my primary personal interest was languages. The interest in foreign affairs really came later, after my exposure to the Taiwan question.

Q: You were sent then, for your first post, to Tokyo?

OSBORN: Yes.

Q: And so your first assignment was Vice Consul in Tokyo?

OSBORN: That's correct.

Q: Do you want to mention a few things about that first post?

OSBORN: Well, the first post was, of course, formative in many ways. It gave me my first taste of consular work, which I enjoyed. It's an enjoyable type of work, although most people approach it with misgivings. It turned out to be quite enjoyable. But it clearly was not going to be my primary interest. It gave me some chance to practice my Japanese, but not very much. At that time there was no embassy in Tokyo; there was, instead, the Diplomatic Section of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers—MacArthur's headquarters. So we dealt less directly with the Japanese public than we did later on.

Q: Why did the Department send you from Tokyo to Taiwan, in February of '49?

OSBORN: This, again, was probably a matter of language. The situation in China was disintegrating badly in 1949. It was becoming obvious that the government of Chiang Kai-shek—the KMT—would very likely end up going to Taiwan; or at least that was a strong possibility. So it was of interest to the United States, and the Department of State, whether the situation in Taiwan would be stable enough to allow Chiang to take refuge there. The KMT's misrule in Taiwan, in 1947, had already provoked an uprising there, in which some

thousands of people were killed; and there was some possibility that the Taiwanese might not exactly welcome Chiang Kai-shek.

At any rate, the Department of State wanted to get a fix on the situation in Taiwan. Now the people in Taiwan, at that time, spoke Japanese. They had been through the Japanese educational system, and it was possible to communicate with them in Japanese. I happened to be, probably, the most available Japanese language speaker at that time, so I was sent to Taiwan, where I was sent on detail down to the USIS Library, in Tainan. Tainan was the old capital of Taiwan, and a good place for establishing contacts with the Taiwanese population. So I went down there, and observed the situation, and began to get my feet on the ground in Taiwan.

Q: Would you like to remind our listeners when Chiang came over from the mainland?

OSBORN: Well, Chiang didn't come over from the mainland until December of '49. I was sent down there in February of '49. The situation on the mainland, from the standpoint of the Republic of China—Chiang Kai-shek's forces—continued to deteriorate. In December of '49, he finally brought his government to Taipei. At that time the situation looked very dubious still, but with the move to Taiwan the KMT forces pulled up their socks, and it began to look possible that the situation there might survive for some time. Although, at that point in time, almost nobody would have thought it would last as long as it has.

Q: When did your active engagement in foreign policy come about?

OSBORN: I became emotionally and intellectually “seized of” the Taiwan problem, by virtue of this assignment in Taiwan. It was impossible, in the Taiwan of 1949 and '50, not to become involved, virtually for one thing, the Taiwan problem—that is to say, the China problem—who had lost China?—had begun to dominate the American political scene in 1949 and '50. So it was during this assignment that we were all—on Taiwan—debating the pros and cons of a United States commitment to Taiwan; the argument being between those who felt that the United States had been pouring sand down a rat hole in trying to

help the forces of Chiang Kai-shek; and on the other hand, the forces of the China lobby—loosely identified as such—who argued that we had never aided Chiang Kai-shek enough, and we should now do more.

This debate was so powerful that we all became engaged in it. And then on top of that, in 1950 the Korean War broke out. This had the effect of freezing the positions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. We feared an attack, so we put the Seventh Fleet in the Strait. The Chinese on the mainland saw the action as a United States declaration of hostility towards China, as a step towards seizing Taiwan.

Q: When did the Taiwan Straits issue actually surface?

OSBORN: That surfaced in its concrete form, with the positioning of the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait, immediately following the outbreak of war in Korea. It's important to note that from the Chinese Communist standpoint, we put the Seventh Fleet in the Strait before they—on their part—had challenged our position on Taiwan, militarily certainly. We put the Fleet there in anticipation of a Chinese Communist threat to Taiwan. So that was the origin of the question, from the Chinese Communist side. From our side the question also had a strong domestic-political component. That is to say, people were still arguing whether we were doing the right thing to support Chiang Kai-shek, or whether we should write him off as a bad bet.

The old China hands had—during the war—tended to favor working toward some kind of mutual understanding with the Chinese Communists, which would avoid conflict there. Whereas there were many people who assumed that conflict between us and Communist China eventually was inevitable, and that we should simply prepare ourselves for it. These debates were going back and forth, and that's how the Strait issue assumed its most urgent form.

Q: Now with all of these policy problems that you've been discussing, what caused the Department to turn away from them, in Taiwan, and transfer you back to Japan?

OSBORN: This was really a matter of normal personnel processing. I was still on the Department's books as a Japanese language officer, and that was considered my normal career. The second point was that I had been on my assignment abroad for a long enough period of time—since July of '48—so I was due for a return on leave to the United States. So I was sent back.

I, also, was posted to the Intermediate Foreign Affairs Course, at the FSI, which had just started up at that time. Following that, the “normal” posting would take me back to Japan; and they, indeed, did send me back to Japan. An opening showed up, in the Consulate in Sapporo, Hokkaido; and I took that over, and held it for two years.

At the end of that period, there was a period of uncertainty—personnel stringency—during what was called the Great RIF of that year—reduction in force. And in connection with that, I was sent down to Kobe, for about one year.

Q: When you were on home leave, at the end of 1953, what happened in Washington?

OSBORN: By February of 1954, it happened that there was an opening in the political side of the Taiwan desk. They were in need of someone to fill it, because the question of the Mutual Defense Treaty—with the Republic of China, on Taiwan—was coming up; we had to negotiate that treaty. And the Department needed people with experience in Taiwan. Not many people knew the ins and outs of the Taiwan question as well as those of us who had been there during the formative period.

The fact that the desk was headed by Al Jenkins, at that time—Al Jenkins being a person I had gotten to know during my assignment to Taipei—probably helped. Anyway, I was picked up and put on the desk.

Q: And you stayed there . . .?

OSBORN: On paper, I remained assigned to the Office of Chinese Affairs until the end of 1957. Actually, I stayed on the desk in the Department until 1955, when I went to Geneva.

Q: I was going to ask about this point in your career, in Chinese Affairs; what led the Department to post you to Geneva?

OSBORN: There it gets back to the Taiwan question. In 1954 there was a conference on Indochina and Korea, at Geneva. This was an important conference, and it was hoped that it would clear away a lot of the underbrush that had grown up between us and China, among other things. At the end of that conference, the Chinese Communists—whose hostility to the United States had been somewhat reduced as a result of that conference—and the United States—which was hoping to at least put the blame for any hostility between us, clearly onto the Chinese Communists—had a common interest in opening this conference, to deal with the issues between us.

On our side, we were concerned about the issue of American prisoners, some of whom had been taken during the Korean War, others had been taken in various ways on the periphery of China, and were being held by the Chinese. We wanted to seek their release. The Chinese—for their part—were most keenly interested in the status of Taiwan. So the talks were set up to deal with these issues.

The issue of Taiwan, which was labeled “The Renunciation of Force in the Taiwan Strait;” the issue of the detained Americans; and an additional issue was that of the exchange of newsmen. The Chinese—for their part—were urging the United States to permit American newsmen to go to China—to permit the exchange of newsmen. Favoring the exchange of information was the popular side of this issue, so we and the Chinese jockeyed for position on it. We feared that dropping the bars would tend to erode domestic support for our own position on China. The Chinese were looking for “leverage” on Taiwan.

Q: Why in early 1957, did you leave Geneva and go back to the Department? It sounds as though this should have been a very busy period in Geneva.

OSBORN: By 1957, the Chinese had become fed up with the lack of progress on Taiwan. This coincided with powerful frustrations in China's domestic programs and its relations with Russia. China “put us on hold” and decided to try other means of attaining its objectives. Putting it another way, the Chinese lost faith in our good faith in seeking an answer to the Taiwan question. But they didn't want to abandon the talks because they still had hopes that at some future time it would be possible to resume progress toward a solution to the Taiwan issue. So they didn't drop the talks all together.

Now we—for our part—wanted the talks to keep going, as a kind of mailbox, where we could drop messages to the Chinese, when we felt the need to communicate with them. And this helped us to withstand political pressures at home. When people demanded that we negotiate with the Chinese, we could say, “Well, we're talking to them at Geneva—or Warsaw,” after the venue was shifted—without any of the pitfalls of actual negotiating, which would have been difficult politically because of our right-wing in the United States.

Q: So you did go back to the Taiwan desk in '57?

OSBORN: I went back to the Taiwan desk, yes, that's correct. And I was still there when—in the normal course of personnel processing—I received a tentative assignment to Dacca.

Q: Now what happened to this assignment to Dacca, in as much as so far you were in Chinese and Japanese Affairs?

OSBORN: There was an incident in Taiwan, called “Black Friday,” in which Chinese demonstrators sacked our embassy, and rioted and destroyed USIS; the usual round of incidents. It was a sensational affair, because the Chinese on Taiwan had been considered—by everyone, ourselves included—to be model clients of ours. And no one could imagine why they were doing this, especially since the Department of State had not

received any adequate forewarning from the embassy in Taipei. It is not likely to make any embassy popular, if the embassy gets wiped out without warning.

It was felt that the embassy's political section probably needed a shake-up; at least some changes were needed. I was one of the changes that took place; I was sent out to be the head of the political section. That is to say, the political counselor.

Q: So upon your return to Taiwan, what were the highlights of this second tour?

OSBORN: The highlight of the second tour in Taiwan was the Taiwan Strait Crisis, of 1958. This was the time when the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu became household words. Despairing of negotiating an end to the Taiwan standoff, the Chinese Communists tried to pressure the KMT forces to withdraw, and abandon the islands. They apparently believed that if they put enough pressure on the Nationalist forces, then the Nationalists would defect or surrender; and this would have such an impact on the Nationalist government, that there would be a possibility of its collapse.

At any rate, the Chinese were putting terrific military pressure on the offshore islands, particularly Quemoy (Chinmen). And the United States became involved in trying to shore-up the position of the Chinese Nationalists. I was the fellow in the embassy—as the political counselor—who was responsible for following this situation, and sending the daily reports on it, as they developed—to the Department. That was certainly the highlight.

Q: Was there one more highlight you'd like to discuss, during that tour? I think you had a nice visit from President Eisenhower?

OSBORN: Yes, we did, and we had some visits from Secretary Dulles. I recall particularly one thing about Secretary Dulles' visit of October, 1958. This was toward the end of the Strait Crisis. When Dulles talked to Chiang, the “Gimo” urged him to take a very stern military posture against the Chinese Communists. According to accounts circulating within the embassy, Secretary Dulles said to him, “Well, you know there's a limit to what we can

do against them, without the possibility of having to use nuclear weapons, and of course, nobody wants that." Reportedly, from the Gimo's lack of reaction against this suggestion, Secretary Dulles got the impression that Chiang Kai-shek was not averse to contemplating this possibility—if necessary. I think Dulles was quite taken aback by that. At any rate, from about that time on, we put increasing pressure on the Taiwan Chinese to accept their position in Taiwan with good grace; and to stop continually harping on returning to the mainland. The Chinese Nationalists—for their part—while they accepted the position, and did not really try to attack the mainland, or really seriously threaten to do so—they would not commit themselves to accepting what they considered a two-Chinas situation. They became very strongly committed to maintaining their identity, as the one sole government of China. That was one highlight.

The other one, which you mentioned, was towards the end of that time, in 1960; the visit of President Eisenhower in 1960, en route to Japan. The President's visit, the first ever by a sitting President, had been scheduled to coincide with the ratification of the revised security treaty with Japan. The visit touched off unprecedented student demonstrations in Tokyo; Zengakuren—the name of the student union in Japan—became a household word in the United States. Television, the news reports, were full of these mobs of student demonstrators in Tokyo, surrounding the embassy, and so on—besieging the Japanese government. At one point in the demonstrations, a Japanese female student was accidentally killed—trampled by the demonstrators—and her death led to an intensification of the rioting, and the protests. As a result, the visit of President Eisenhower had to be canceled.

I happened to be at the luncheon table when President Eisenhower's advance man—Jim Hagerty, his press secretary—was passing through Taipei on his way to Tokyo. Hagerty asked what was going to happen in Tokyo, whether the President's visit would go off smoothly or not. I told him not to worry; surely the Japanese police, who were very expert

in these matters, would be able to take care of any problem. This was a case of “famous last words.”

The cancellation of the visit was a big trauma. One incidental result was to put me back on the trail towards another assignment in Tokyo. One, it reminded me that I was supposed to be a Japanese expert, and I had just shown in my remarks to Hagerty, that I was in need of updating. Also, those riots, and the cancellation of the President's visit—were among the things that led to the assignment of Ambassador Reischauer to Japan.

Ed Reischauer was our foremost academic expert on Japan. The events leading to the cancellation of the Eisenhower visit made the Department realize the need to have a real Japanese expert in Tokyo, and Ed Reischauer was sent there. Ed Reischauer had been my instructor in Harvard, and his appointment may have been another factor.

Q: So you did return to Tokyo, and what was your job?

OSBORN: I was assigned to the political section, on the desk which dealt with conservative party affairs; that is to say, government party affairs. I was responsible for reporting on events in the Japanese Diet, and on elections and other political affairs in Japan.

Q: What were the highlights of this over three-year tour in Tokyo?

OSBORN: Well, it was an exciting period. We had as one important focus, the Japanese protests over our resumption of nuclear testing in 1962. As one of the most fluent Japanese speakers in the political section, it fell to me to deal with most of the protestors who were coming not only to demonstrate and protest against our resumption of nuclear testing; but also to demand the return of Okinawa. So day after day I would meet with small groups of protestors, bring them up to my office, talk to them, argue with them, and, as necessary, bring them in to see Ambassador Reischauer, who was very good at dealing with them.

For me personally, one of the highlights of my tour was the visit of then Attorney General Bobby Kennedy. The Bobby Kennedy visit was set up and largely financed by Japanese politicians, who saw in this visit a way of trying to inspire the Japanese public with some sense of momentum in the relationship with the United States; of bringing a little bit of the "Kennedy spirit" to Japan. And they saw this as a way of improving their own political situation. Anything that made the United States look good to the Japanese people tended to make the Liberal Democratic Party look good, because the LDP was so strongly identified with the United States. Conversely, anything that made the United States look bad, tended to strengthen the socialists, who were the principal opponents.

At any rate, the Japanese put a lot of effort into making the visit of Bobby Kennedy a terrific success. It was the most successful goodwill visit, I think, that Japan had had, up to that point.

After that, the opposite pole perhaps, was the assassination of President Kennedy, which struck Japan almost as painful a blow as it did the United States. No one who was there at that time can forget the sight of thousands of Japanese in the street, mourning the death of the President. All of us in the embassy had to take our turns in appearing at different gatherings, to join with the Japanese in tribute to the President. It was a very moving time.

Another highlight for me personally, of course, was the promotion to FSO-1.

Q: Were you—like many officers—ever interested in a War College assignment?

OSBORN: Of course I was interested in a War College assignment. I had been considered repeatedly, but had always been too busy to be spared. Now, the time was approaching when I would have been getting a little bit long in the tooth for a War College assignment.

Q: Being exposed to trends in the government, during that War College assignment, probably led to what happened to you at the end of that experience?

OSBORN: As a matter of fact it did. I enjoyed the War College assignment very much; it was, indeed, a broadening experience. And one of the things I was exposed to was what they called the PPBS system, which had to do with allocation of resources, and budgeting. At any rate, after my War College assignment, I was assigned to the largest bureau in the Department of State—at that time—which was CU, Education and Cultural Affairs. I was the deputy assistant secretary in the bureau, and as such I had responsibility for budgeting. This is where I began to put to use what I had learned in the War College assignment, about planning, programming, budgeting, and so on.

I tried to help CU withstand the pressures that Vietnam was beginning to exert on President Johnson's budget, which in turn put tremendous pressure on CU, and other operating agencies. I developed schedules of objectives and priorities, and ended up designing a computer program to allocate educational exchange resources among the component offices of the Bureau, on a rational basis.

Q: Despite these rather interesting developments that you were working with—the PPBS, the computers—you did serve for only one and a half years in the CU job. Why did you leave after such a short tour?

OSBORN: Well, I had originally been sent to the War College on the understanding that after completion of my assignment I would return to a posting at Embassy Tokyo. That had been my understanding with Ambassador Reischauer. Also, Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, who had been my superior in the talks with the Chinese Communists at Geneva, had in the meantime been posted as ambassador to Japan.

Q: And you went back in what post?

OSBORN: I went back as DCM. This is something that no normal Foreign Service officer can pass up—a DCM-ship at a major post.

Q: You did three years there, as DCM in Tokyo?

OSBORN: Yes, a little over three years.

Q: From 1967 to 1970?

OSBORN: Yes.

Q: And so what were some highlights of that tour?

OSBORN: We were beginning our negotiations with the Japanese toward their signature of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, the NPT. We were also beginning to talk to the Japanese about the treaty for the reversion of Okinawa, to which Secretary Dulles had committed himself years and years ago.

In early 1969, shortly after President Nixon's inauguration, something happened to really test the foreign policy structure of the new administration—North Korea's shooting down of an electronic countermeasures aircraft—the EC-121. This looked like it might give rise to actual hostilities between our forces in Japan and the North Koreans.

This precipitated a potential crisis, with the Japanese. While we had treaties giving us bases in Japan, and had our forces there, it remained to be established that we would be free to use those forces effectively in active hostilities—vis-#-vis the North Koreans. So this was a very tense situation, and as it happened, I was in charge of the embassy during that period. Ambassador Johnson, widely respected in the Pentagon, the Congress, as well as in the Department of State, had been called back to Washington to work on the transition team, to establish the foreign policy of the new Nixon administration. This left me in charge.

I enjoyed my tour as charg# very much.

Q: Even though you're sitting in Tokyo, with all these exciting things going on around you, you never lost your interest in China policy?

OSBORN: No, it was impossible for me to lose my interest in China policy. China policy questions were so much a part of the whole cold war period. And certainly from the standpoint of Japan, China policy was a very important component of their relationship with the United States.

The Japanese conservatives had developed an odd interplay with the United States in regard to China policy. Conservative Japanese—for political reasons, their own domestic political reasons—did not wish to have to recognize Communist China. This would have been a victory for the Japanese socialist party; it would have caused all sorts of problems for the conservatives. But they could not oppose it publicly, because it was very popular with the Japanese people. This was a very interesting situation, that we had to monitor, and live with.

Q: You personally were deeply interested in what you liked to call the one-China policy?

OSBORN: Well, as far back as 1965—while in the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs—it had occurred to me that the United States really should get off the dime on China policy, and start moving to work out a fundamental solution to the problems in our relationship. The only way to do that, I felt, was to find a way to set aside the Taiwan question.

So in 1965 I had tried to circulate a memo within the Department, urging that we declare a one-China policy; that is to say, we satisfy the Chinese Communists by accepting the fact that Taiwan is inalienable part of China, while simultaneously making it clear that we did not look with favor, and would not tolerate, a military resolution of the problem, on Chinese Communist terms. This I felt would probably be a minimum provision to satisfy the

Nationalist Chinese, and their supporters. So I had been trying to promote this solution off and on, since that time.

In Tokyo, I also circulated memoranda, drafted “Mr. X” type articles, and talked to visiting Congressmen and others about this issue. But the fear of the Chinese Communist bugaboo was a very large part of the context of the Vietnam War, so nobody was willing to confront the Taiwan question, with the necessary determination, during that time. They were preoccupied with other matters.

At any rate, I had not lost my interest in the Taiwan question; certainly not.

Q: After your three years in Tokyo, did you then immediately have another overseas post, or once again did you return to the Department?

OSBORN: I had been informally designated for assignment as a consul general at Hong Kong even before I left Tokyo. But there was also another thing that came up at that time.

I suppose because of my number-crunching efforts in CU, I was asked to set up a task force, to consider economic assistance policy over the next five years in Southeast Asia. I did so, and I worked out a scheme, and put it on computers, to enable us to determine a logical allocation of resources—aid resources—among the nations of Southeast Asia, during that time frame. It was a very hard job; a very interesting one for me. But it was really caught up in the disaster that was happening in Vietnam, and had no chance to be realized.

Q: It was completed—I understand—in just six months?

OSBORN: It was completed in six months, yes.

Q: And then you were finally chosen to be consul general in Hong Kong? You went there in 1970?

OSBORN: This was a delayed fulfillment of personnel planning which had been underway before. Ed Martin had moved on from Hong Kong, to be ambassador in Burma; and I was sent out to take Ed Martin's place.

Also, certainly one of the reasons why I was interested in the Hong Kong assignment, was the fact that Hong Kong was considered a post of China watchers. I was sent to Hong Kong to be a China-watcher watcher. I spent a lot of my time agonizing over the Chinese representation issue, and over the issues of our relationships with China.

This was the period of the cultural revolution, which at one point made it seem as though the Chinese Communists were about to take over control of Hong Kong militarily. So it was a rather tense period.

Q: You were there, of course, for almost four years. It seems to me, I remember some very important visits?

OSBORN: Well, as I say, the pressures for a solution of the China problem had been building up, and building up. And finally, something had to be done about our relationship with China. President Nixon saw that, and of course, Secretary Kissinger saw that. This was the period during which Secretary Kissinger peeled off from a world tour, and went up to Peking; and held the initial consultations looking toward President Nixon's visit and the normalization of relations.

Q: You had been sent, of course, to Hong Kong to relieve Ed Martin when he was named ambassador to Rangoon. Did the same procedure happen to you?

OSBORN: Yes, in a way it did; I was sent to Rangoon in 1974, to relieve Ed Martin. For a brief period of time, it's my understanding that I was considered by Secretary Kissinger to be one of his staff aides; that is to say, to be the head of INR, in the Department of State.

In October 1973, I was called back to meet with Secretary Kissinger in his office, as I was told, to see whether I would be given that assignment.

As far as I, personally, was concerned, I tried to make it clear—and I think I succeeded—that I would prefer assignment as ambassador to Rangoon, rather than having a Department assignment, at that time. Like most Foreign Service officers, I was conditioned to prefer overseas assignments. At any rate, that's what happened.

Q: So you arrived in Burma, in March of 1974?

OSBORN: Yes, March of 1974.

Q: You were there from '74 to '77, as ambassador in Rangoon. What was the main focus of your work during these three years?

OSBORN: The biggest problems in our relations with Rangoon at that time were the narcotics problems. The Golden Triangle, of which that corner of Burma is a large part, was then producing the lion's share of the raw opium that went into the world's illicit narcotics traffic.

During the Vietnam War, the American troops in Vietnam began to consume large quantities of heroin, and this contributed to an increasing tendency to refine the opium into heroin in the countries where it was grown, so that it could then supply the growing demand among the American forces and others.

In the past, opium had been used as a sort of all-purpose medicine by the hill tribes and others in those countries, with little impact on the illegal heroin traffic or drug addiction in the United States. When the domestic production of heroin started in the field—in those countries—it began to enter directly into the narcotics problem in the United States. It also created serious drug addiction problems in Burma and other Southeast Asian

countries. So it became very important for the United States and for the local governments to cooperate in eradicating opium and heroin production if they could.

So one of the first things that I had to do, in Burma, was to work out a treaty for the supply of helicopters for use in eradicating opium and heroin production.

There was also, of course, the endemic problem of insurgencies, which further complicated the narcotics problem. Since the war, Burma had not had a single year in which it was not plagued with insurgencies, by one or the other—usually more than one—of its racial minorities. The Shan, the Karens, the Kachins, the Wa, and other indigenous groups, not to mention the “KMT irregulars,” nationalists Chinese holdouts from the Chinese civil war, many of whom supported themselves by producing and trafficking in opium and heroin.

So it became very important for the Burmese to have use of good helicopters, with the proper tactics, in order to interdict the growth, transportation, and refining of heroin in their jungle areas—and not just incidentally, to combat the insurgents. So this is why we were able to arrange that agreement; and it is why we could count on Burmese cooperation in suppressing the growth and process of opium.

Q: I think you even had to live through an abortive coup there?

OSBORN: Meanwhile, the fundamental problem for Burma was the steady collapse —steady deterioration of the economic position. The economy had been deteriorating ever since the Burmese had adopted their very peculiar form of socialism, which was even more antithetical than most varieties of socialism towards economic prosperity and growth. Socialism is no way to run a railroad! Anyone who doubted that should have been assigned to Burma in those years.

Naturally, there was strong and growing sentiment among the ordinary people of Burma, for somehow getting rid of their particular socialist system—the Burma Socialist Program

Party or “BSPP.” Now during the time that I was there, a group of junior military officers began to plot in earnest to knock over the government, and to install a degree of free enterprise-oriented democracy. The embassy was not aware of this plot, and of course had no part in it.

One of the plotters' hopes was that they could promote meaningful, joint-venture investment from the United States. These junior military officers (later called the “Captains Coup Plotters”) plotted a coup to overthrow the government, which, by coincidence, was to occur very near the time of our July 4th celebrations, in 1976—the bicentennial celebrations. The young plotters—did in fact attempt to launch their coup, but they blew it.

At the time it happened—that evening, in July of 1976—I was attending a dinner party at the Pakistani ambassador's home, when I was called home and learned—on getting back to my residence—that the leader of the Captains Coup group was seeking asylum in the residence. This presented us with a problem, because the embassy and its code room had been shut down; we did not maintain 24 hours. It would have been impossible for me to go to the embassy and have a telephone conversation, or a telegraphic exchange with the Department, without alerting the Burmese that something was up. So I had a consultation with my acting political counselor, and the Acting CIA station chief; and I decided that we would have to handle this on our own—without immediate reference to the Department.

What I decided to do was to offer the captain his free choice: on the one hand, he could take shelter in the embassy, with the understanding that he would have to be turned over to the Burmese when and if they came and made a proper request for his release. One the other hand, if he so desired, we would take him to any part of Rangoon that he designated, and drop him at the roadside, with no questions asked, and he would be on his own and free to try to escape. He thought it over for a while, and then chose to take his chances on trying to escape. So, true to our promise, we took him and deposited him near the [Sule] Pagoda, and he took it from there. As it turned out, he was able to hide out for only a matter of a few weeks; a couple of weeks later he was, in fact, picked up by the Burmese

police, and imprisoned. Ultimately he was put on trial for his part in the coup attempt, and was probably executed, I fear. In some ways, that was the most dramatic episode in my tour in Burma.

Q: And so your tour in Burma ended in 1977, and at that point you decided it was just time to retire?

OSBORN: Yes; I did undertake a brief whirlwind tour in the inspection corps, and went off to inspect Barbados, Suriname, and other Caribbean posts. Following that I did retire.

Q: And now in 1989, we find ourselves in San Diego.

OSBORN: Yes. I certainly have no regrets about being here.

Q: Thank you Mr. Ambassador, for your time this morning. This has been a revealing interview, with a lot of exciting Far Eastern developments over the years. We are very grateful for your participation in the oral history program.

End of interview